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Bombs Away, For Good

By Linton Brooks

Are the plans to upgrade our nuclear arsenal with a Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) consistent with America's interests in opposing the proliferation of nuclear weapons? Some reasonable critics of the program have expressed doubts.

They are wrong: The RRW is fully consistent with U.S. nuclear nonproliferation objectives.

When judging this issue, consider the first and most basic question: Should the U.S. even have a nuclear deterrent? For the past 60 years, U.S. nuclear forces have strengthened our security as well as the security and stability of the international community. They have also helped prevent nuclear proliferation by extending our deterrent to protect allies, who therefore don't need to seek their own nuclear weapons. Japan's deep concern in the wake of North Korea's nuclear test shows that the need for extended deterrence remains strong.

But what about the size and shape of our deterrent? The RRW will replace many of the current, aging warheads deployed on Trident D-5 submarine-launched ballistic missiles. It provides no new military capability, nor increases the arsenal's size or power.

Three further questions need to be considered regarding nonproliferation. Will the RRW make future nuclear testing more or less likely? Will it advance or hinder efforts to reduce the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal? Will it make the weapons we deploy safer and more secure?

Both the administration and Congress have made it clear the RRW is being pursued under the requirement that it will *not* need to be tested before being certified to become part of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. This reinforces our commitment to maintaining our moratorium on underground nuclear testing.

No one can, however, guarantee that as the older weapons in our current stockpile age further, they will not need to be tested to maintain confidence in their safety and reliability.

The RRW will also facilitate further reductions in the U.S. nuclear stockpile. U.S. accomplishments in this area have already been substantial, if largely overlooked. Whole classes of nuclear weapons delivery vehicles -- short-range and intermediate range nuclear missiles -- have been eliminated.

The number of nuclear weapons dismantled this year will increase by over 50% compared to last year. The number of deployed strategic nuclear weapons will go from over 10,000 at the peak of the Cold War, to between 1,700 and 2,200 by 2012. Because of decisions by the Bush administration, within five years, our nuclear arsenal will be at its lowest since the 1950s.

Moreover, the RRW will give us greater confidence in the reliability of our weapons. This increased confidence will reduce the need for large numbers of spare warheads and allow us to take the U.S. stockpile to still lower levels, consistent with our international obligations under the Nonproliferation Treaty.

Finally, the RRW will allow us to deploy weapons that are safer to make and to store for people and the environment and also less susceptible to theft or misuse by terrorists. For example, the new warhead will not use beryllium, a poisonous metal used in the current weapons. Moreover, anti-theft measures have improved dramatically over the decades and will be implemented in the new warhead, preventing unauthorized use.

In sum, the new warhead will make nuclear testing less likely, facilitate further reductions in our arsenal, and help to ensure that the weapons we do deploy are as safe and secure as possible. The RRW is thus entirely consistent with U.S. nonproliferation objectives. It deserves the support of the nonproliferation community, the national-security community and all Americans.

Mr. Brooks negotiated the START I Treaty in 1991 and was a senior arms control and nonproliferation official in five agencies within the U.S. government. From 2002 to 2007 he was the administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration.